

What is the function of book 8 in Virgil's *Aeneid*?

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Book 8 of Virgil's *Aeneid* has many different purposes, such as celebrating Rome and reliving the history of the city and its founders. It also honours Aeneas and promotes Augustus as a leader by making connections between him and Aeneas. In this book, Virgil also shows his knowledge of Homer's *Iliad*, by describing a shield made by Vulcan in a similar fashion to the way Homer describes a shield that Hephaestus gave to Achilles.

A hero among gods and men

In book 8, Virgil presents Aeneas as more of a hero than he has been in previous books. Whereas normally the only immortal to help Aeneas is Venus (his mother), Vulcan and Tiberinus also give him help in this book. This offers a more even-handed portrayal of the divine forces as Aeneas is now being helped by several immortals, to balance out the malevolent effects of the hostility of Juno. This also makes Aeneas look like more of a hero as he is favoured and helped by multiple gods and not just his mother. Although Venus is an extremely powerful goddess in her own right, aid from her does not have the same level of significance, as she is Aeneas' mother and is therefore expected to help him. On the other hand, Venus is not presented as being very close to Aeneas, and when they first meet in book 1, she is in disguise and does not reveal herself. This suggests that she treats him similarly to other mortals, as her disguise could be to test Aeneas' *xenia* or hospitality.

When Aeneas goes to visit the Arcadians, they immediately recognize him. This highlights to the reader his importance and significance in distant lands at this time. Up until this point in the poem the only other example we have of the fame of the Trojans is in book 1 where the tales of the Trojan War are displayed in the imagery on the temple of Juno at Carthage.

The fact that Evander, founder of Pallantium and King of the Arcadians, immediately forms a pact with Aeneas (because he knew Aeneas' father and had great respect for him) and trusts him shows Aeneas to be a more heroic figure, as this action is based on his family's reputation as well as his own character. The

reader therefore learns that the Trojan War has earned the Trojans a great deal of respect and hospitality abroad.

Creating narrative suspense

Another function of book 8 of the *Aeneid* is to suspend the impending war that will soon happen, rather than just going straight into the battle after the catalogue of forces that ended book 7. The reader of book 8 is introduced to characters who will later be supporting Aeneas and dying for him, such as Pallas, who will die at the hands of Turnus in book 10 and whose death prompts Aeneas to take Turnus' own life at the very end of the poem. The farewell scene between old Evander and his young son, entrusted into the protection of Aeneas, is therefore unbearably poignant and ominous.

This all adds to the interest of the reader when it comes to the war itself as they will know about the people fighting for Aeneas and therefore be more intrigued as to the result of the battle. The postponement of the war also increases the suspense and tension of the poem.

Homeric echoes: the motif of the shield

Virgil's description of the shield that Vulcan created for Aeneas is strikingly similar to Homer's description of the shield that Hephaestus (Vulcan) created for Achilles. This creates interesting parallels between Achilles and Aeneas – divine mothers helping get them armour and their destiny of death or glory – even though Achilles was Greek and Aeneas was a Trojan. Virgil's comparison of Aeneas with Achilles adds to Aeneas' reputation as a hero and gives him a model to live up

to, as well as providing a link between the Greeks and the Trojans.

Venus thinks Aeneas needs a shield because she wants him to be protected in his looming battle; as he has managed to survive Troy, she wants him to suffer as little as possible in the future. It is still odd that Venus feels Aeneas needs a new shield, as he still has his shield from the Trojan War. This is unlike Achilles, who lost his shield after the death of Patroclus, and so was in need of new armour and a shield.

The similarity between Homer's description of the shield and Virgil's description is of course deliberate. Virgil, like all Roman poets, wrote for a learned audience, who would have been able to speak and understand Ancient Greek and to be fully familiar with the great classical texts of the Greek past: Greek and Greece were the high-point of culture for the Romans of Virgil's day. Although the descriptions of the two shields are written in a similar manner, the actual shields of Aeneas and Achilles seem to differ quite a bit. Achilles' shield depicts the various aspects of daily life: cities, countryside, night and day, a vineyard, and farm animals, whereas Aeneas' shield is telling the story of the nation's future and the founding and ruling of Rome. Homer's shield is literally a panorama of the world for which the warriors are fighting; while Virgil's shield is more like a timeline looking to the glorious destiny of Aeneas and his descendants, for which Aeneas' looming war is but the starting point.

Telescoping time

The story told on the shield ends with Actium and this emphasizes Augustus' place as the embodiment of Rome's greatness. Augustus was the emperor of Rome at the time that Virgil wrote this poem and was also behind the commissioning of the poem. Virgil has already included a good deal of praise and celebration of the emperor in this poem – Jupiter's speech in book 1, Anchises' famous parade of heroes in book 6 – and one may wonder why he needed to add this ostentatious description of the battle which brought Augustus to power in 31 B.C.

The detailed description of the shield

(along with the topography of Evander's humble kingdom) contrasts the lowliness of Rome's foundation, during Romulus' era (850 years after Aeneas) with the greatness of contemporary Rome. References to Caesar's extensive empire are there and this growth and expansion also parallels the story of Aeneas. At the beginning of the *Aeneid*, Aeneas and his men are refugees as they have been forced to flee Troy after their defeat in the Trojan War, but they later end up founding their own city in Italy, known as Lavinium.

When writing about the two eras, Virgil compresses the time shift from Romulus' era to Augustus' rule into just a few lines, which further increases the contrast and emphasizes the difference between the two time periods, as well as providing a coherent connection between the two. Although it initially appears to be strange to 'concertina' time at this point in the poem, it makes the growth of Rome in every aspect seem more significant and noteworthy, and makes Virgil's Rome appear to be even greater.

Fashioning Roman history

The other function of the shield's imagery is to downplay the 'civil war' aspect of Actium by representing it as a war between Rome and Egypt, between Roman gods and the bizarre canine god Anubis, between men and a woman (Cleopatra). By doing this, the Egyptians are presented to be barbaric and uncivilized and the Romans as civilized men who deserve to win.

Virgil also makes strong associations and connections between Augustus and Aeneas. For example, both had to rebuild their communities or societies. Augustus was forced to try and keep Rome together after the murder of Caesar and Mark Antony's betrayal to live with the Egyptian queen, Cleopatra. Aeneas is therefore similar to Augustus as he was destined to found the nation, which Augustus was to rule. Augustus was named in the will of Julius Caesar as his heir, and Aeneas' son Iulus was the ancestor of Julius Caesar. One has to remember, however, that at the time of writing the poem Augustus had not been emperor for long and so Virgil's propaganda for the regime is as much wishful thinking as spin-doctoring the politics of the day. The battle of Actium, as shown on the shield, gives the young emperor an image of heroic victory which any leader would find hard to live up to.

A further link is created between Aeneas and his descendants when Aeneas travels down the Tiber to see the Arcadians. He visits the land where Rome is to be founded 850 years later by Romulus, which forges a stronger connection between the two and also makes

Rome appear greater as the heroic and famous Aeneas once stepped on that soil. This event also makes the reader view Aeneas in a more favourable manner as he can be seen as one of the founding fathers of their civilized and great empire. As Romans were often extremely proud of their background and the history of their country, this direct causal link between the saga of Aeneas and their own city of Rome would make this poem irresistible to the patriotic audience.

Redefining heroism

The tale of Hercules and Cacus is told to show another, simpler, view of heroism. As the Arcadians honour Hercules annually, it makes them appear to be a more civilized society as they honour good qualities in people, such as the strength and dedication of Hercules to get his four bulls back from Cacus, an untrustworthy thief. Virgil has Evander tell this tale at some length, giving Aeneas another lesson in the use of might, *virtus*, and *ratio*; this image puts pressure on him to be the match of Hercules over the next few difficult months as he faces his own Italian enemies.

It can also be argued that another function of book 8 of the *Aeneid* is to complete Aeneas' education in the duties and responsibilities of leadership, both from Evander's tale of Hercules and Cacus, as well as the shield created for Aeneas by Vulcan.

A lesson in politics across the ages?

One could look at book 8 of the *Aeneid* in the manner of post-1945 German ideology where the role of an intellectual in society was to be 'the conscience of the nation': Virgil could have written in order to advise and help Augustus, the emperor at this time, who had not been in power for long. After the second world war in Germany, the express purpose of some 'engaged' writers was to give advice to the government, which is obvious in works such as *Die Ästhetik des Widerstands* by Peter Weiss and *Die verlorene Ehre der Katharina Blum* by Heinrich Böll. Literature like this – and the *Aeneid* – does not always make comfortable reading for the government.

Book 8 of Virgil's *Aeneid* shows and celebrates the city of Rome itself. Initially, Rome is shown to have been a small plot of land, but by the time Caesar is in power, it has expanded into a capital of one million souls running a great empire. There is much use of the 'then-and-now' effect of parts of the city that are now landmarks, which were merely clods of earth in Evander's time.

In conclusion, the function of book 8 of Virgil's *Aeneid* is elusive. On the surface

it gives us a heroic view of a budding hero looking forward to a glorious government of Virgil's own day: but under the surface is the issue of whether the ideal matches the reality in Rome of the 20s B.C. – and whether the budding hero will prove to be a Hercules or a Cacus in the looming war in Italy.

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